

California Connected by 25

Efforts to Address the Permanency Needs of Transitioning Foster Youth

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The California Connected by 25 Initiative is a collaborative effort of five foundations to improve the life prospects of youth transitioning out of foster care in California. Counties participating in CC25I aim to improve policies, programs and outcomes for transition-age foster youth in seven focus areas: K-12 Education; Employment/Job Training/Post-Secondary Education; Financial Competency and Asset Development; Housing; Independent Living Skills Programs; Personal/Social Asset Development; and Permanency. Four counties – Fresno, San Francisco, Santa Clara and Stanislaus Counties – are early implementers of the Initiative.

This report documents the Initiative's progress made by each of the early implementing counties in the area of Permanency. The philosophy of permanency puts high priority on finding legal permanency through reunification, adoption and guardianships for youth, but encompasses much more than that. The need for this shift is great as legal permanency is not actively pursued for many older youth in the foster care system. In 2005, nearly 70,000 foster youth (13 percent of all youth in care in the country) had a case goal of "long-term foster care" or "emancipation"¹ and in California in 2004, 4,500 youth were still in a foster or group home placement when they emancipated or aged out of the system. Recent changes in federal and California law have prioritized older youths' needs for permanency by increasing subsidies and adding new requirements for county agencies to find permanent placements for older youth. Many of these efforts, such as the KinGAP and Kinship Support Services programs, have sought to remove barriers and increase incentives for family members to adopt or become guardians to older foster youth. The Older Foster Youth Adoption Initiative of 2006 provides funds to four California counties to develop successful strategies for increasing adoptions among older youth (age nine and up) who have been in nonrelative foster homes or group homes for 18 months or longer. Finally, a number of bills have strengthened siblings' rights to be placed together (where possible), and to be informed of their siblings' placements so they can remain in contact.

Even so, these efforts to create legal permanency for older or emancipating foster youth confront a number of ongoing challenges. Despite legislation that encourages or mandates concurrent planning – the policy of identifying possible permanent arrangements for foster youth while simultaneously pursuing family reunification – many agencies do not actively practice it, particularly for older youth. Indeed, welfare workers may consider working towards adoption or guardianship for older youth to be a pointless, or even counterproductive, undertaking. They may fear that if a permanent placement fails, the youth will experience further trauma. They may recognize that transition-age youth can lose eligibility for important resources, such as access to the Independent Living Skills Program and aftercare programs, if they are adopted or placed in legal guardianship.² The historical funding policies for federal foster care have also created incentives for states to rely on foster care placements rather than adoption and guardianship.²

Recognizing these difficulties, foster care agencies across the country have experimented with alternative models of permanency that do not involve adoption or guardianship. Studies have shown that former foster youth who can rely on an ongoing, committed relationship with a caring, supportive adult are more likely to successfully navigate the challenges of early adulthood, including persisting in education, remaining employed, and participating more fully in their communities as adults. In particular, even if it does not guarantee a place to live or financial support in difficult times, having a connection to *family* is important to youth. The Midwest Study found that former foster youth reported a strong connection to family members; 94 percent of all former foster youth felt somewhat or very close to at least one biological family member, with 77 percent reporting feeling very close to a biological family member. By far, the strongest connection for youth was with their biological siblings to whom 57 percent felt very close. This is important to note because 70 percent of youth in foster care have siblings also in care and as many as 75 percent of foster youth are separated from at least one sibling while in care.³

CC25I counties have received technical assistance from the California Permanency for Youth Project and other experts, and are implementing a broad array of permanency best practices that encompass more than adoption or guardianship. These efforts within the child welfare agencies, and together with community partners, are working to ensure that all youth leave the foster care system with at least one lifelong connection to a caring, committed, loving adult, feeling both resilient and empowered to reach their full potential. Key permanency strategies being utilized by CC25I counties include family finding techniques such as Internet search as well as youth, caregiver and cross agency collaborations that identify, develop and support significant relationships. Because permanency work must often address issues of grief and loss common among foster youth, child welfare

¹ The AFCARS Report: Preliminary FY 2005 Estimates as of September 2006. Available at: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/cwo05/appendix/appendix.htm>

² National Foster Care Awareness Project. (2000). Frequently Asked Questions about the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 and the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program.

³ The Pew Charitable Trust. (2007). *Time for Reform: Aging Out and On Their Own. More Teens Leaving Foster Care without a Permanency Family*. Available at: http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Foster_care_reform/Kids_are_Waiting_TimeforReform0307.pdf.

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agencies are increasingly turning to mental health clinicians, grief and loss experts, and youth advocates to support youth, case workers and permanent connections in sustaining permanency outcomes over time.

County Progress in Reaching CC25I Permanency Objectives

The Permanency outcome for the CC25I initiative is based on the recognition that for transition-age foster youth, relationship permanence can be as important as physical or legal permanence. The priority outcome measure is: the percentage of foster youth whom the child welfare agency assesses as having a “permanent connection,” defined as a “stable relationship with a safe adult who has made a commitment to provide lifelong support.” Counties are still implementing new data tracking strategies that will allow ongoing assessment of CC25I’s permanency outcome. However, the progress made towards the goals of the CC25I Permanency Logic Model provides an early indicator of whether counties are on track to achieve the anticipated outcomes.

All CC25I early implementing counties received a variety of assessment, training and technical assistance from the California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYP) or other permanency experts. Counties established workgroups to oversee permanency efforts, while also creating new trainings around permanency that were offered to social workers, caregivers, youth, other public agencies and community partners. In addition, the counties undertook new initiatives to expand family finding, recruit adoptive families specifically for older youth, engage in team decision making to support permanency and transition planning, and support sibling relationships and lifelong connections. Much of the counties’ initial permanency work focused on small-scale efforts within a limited number of agency units or on specific subpopulations of foster youth, but over time these efforts have expanded to additional units and youth populations.

Examples of counties’ innovative strategies to support permanency efforts include:

Fresno County

- The County launched a highly visible recruitment program, “Wednesday’s Child” to find adoptive families for teen foster youth showcased on television broadcasts. In addition, the “Heart Gallery,” utilizes highly visible public venues (such as malls and libraries) to display photos and narratives of teens and sibling groups in need of permanency. These efforts have resulted in at least four adoptions and nine other permanent placements for featured youth.

San Francisco County

- Supported by Older Youth Adoption funding, the County and Family Builders are engaging in a case review and training project that uses a standardized tool to review the placement history, family connections and other characteristics of 150 individual foster youth, and develops an action plan to advance permanency objectives for each case.
- The County is partnering with the Seneca Center, in a national study conducted by Child Trends, to engage in front-end family finding services for up to 100 children who are new to the child welfare system.

Santa Clara County

- The County developed a new model to advance permanency outcomes among transitional age youth based on several best practices in the field. This model was piloted among 40 foster youth (ages 13 to 18) in need of permanent connections. Among this group, 34 youth were successfully connected with family members on a variety of levels, and all youth who have since aged out of the system did so with at least one permanent connection in place.

Stanislaus County

- CSA placed early emphasis on involving youth in their own permanency planning and their Youth Advisory Council led the way by developing the Connected for Life Meeting concept. Connected for Life Meetings, which identify individuals who are important to the youth and formalize lifelong connections through the creation of “Agreements to Maintain Contact,” are as youth-driven as possible.
- The County has implemented front-end family finding for **all** children and youth in foster care, starting with their first entry into care, and its Lifelong Connections database makes accessible to all social workers the results of these searches. Youth can request a list of names contained in their database file and work with their social worker to establish connection with any relative listed. A review of 94 foster youth (age 14 or older, with a case goal of long-term care, and not in guardianship settings) found that 100 percent had a completed family-finding search, with an average of 24 connections identified per youth. Three-fourths (73 percent) of the youth had a formal Connected for Life relationship.

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Key Lessons Learned

Stakeholders in a Youth's Case Often Disagree on Permanency Options. CC25I counties report that court representatives sometimes lack a clear understanding of permanency philosophy, that mental health providers may feel a youth is too unstable to pursue permanency and that caseworkers themselves often struggle to make choices in light of the tradeoffs involved in different placement options. One strategy to prevent these challenges from impeding permanency efforts is to engage in regular cross-trainings and inter-agency staff meetings that routinely emphasize the importance of permanency, familiarize all present with its objectives, and jointly discuss the pros and cons of various permanency options. Counties are also documenting permanency activity in court records and case files so this information is available to all stakeholders.

Youth Need Mental Health and Other Support to Facilitate Permanency Efforts. Agency staff, as well as other stakeholders such as foster family agencies, probation departments and mental health agencies, have greatly benefited from professional guidance on how to help youth and families deal with grief and loss and prepare for family finding and other permanency efforts. Child welfare staff in CC25I counties are also working with youth, caregivers and placement agencies to provide mental health and other services to resolve the issues that impede efforts to move them from therapeutic group homes to permanent, lower level of care placements in family settings.

Child Welfare Staff Need Continued Training and Support Resources. Child welfare staff can benefit from ongoing training opportunities and other support in their efforts to implement permanency philosophy and practice. Some social workers would like support on subtle issues such as how best to discuss permanency with youth, how to actively engage youth and other key participants in permanency team meetings, and how to keep permanency goals in sight when facing heavy caseloads or a crisis mentality. Counties are creating specialized trainings for caseworkers and supervisors are working more closely with workers to review cases, discuss case planning and establish clear steps to achieve permanency for each youth.

Sustainability of Permanency Efforts is Impacted by Agency Funding and Staffing Dynamics. Most CC25I counties have already experienced or anticipate experiencing challenges in sustaining their permanency efforts in the future due to staff turnover or reductions in funding and staff levels. In response, some counties are trying to balance the permanency and family-finding needs of youth close to emancipating from foster care against efforts to identify permanent placement options for newly-placed foster youth. Creating a number of "permanency champions" throughout the agency is one strategy to prevent over reliance on a single permanency specialist position or contracted service providers, as well as to keep permanency efforts on track in times of high staff turnover.

Need for Ongoing Support for Youth and Adult Lifelong Connections, and for Emancipated Youth with no Lifelong Connection. CC25I counties have commented that in addition to locating family members, child welfare agencies must do more to facilitate the actual development and maintenance of lifelong connections. Counties are now providing services and social events to support sibling visitation, relationship development between youth and lifelong connections, and creation of a social network for emancipated youth who left care without a lifelong connection.